Humanists vision

Erich Fromm To Have or to Be? reviewed by the Rev Dr William Strawson.

Anyone who thinks humanism can be easily countered by a few puritan "proofs" of the existence of God should read this book. Fromm is not much bothered whether there is a God or not. What bothers him is that humanity is in danger, because of man's increasing insistence that life consists of, having things, not in being something.

There are two dangers in this list, for this is at best for things. It uses up limited resources at an alarming rate, so that within the foreseeable future, planet earth will be a desert without habitation. And more seriously than that, the "having mode" is quite as harmful as the "being mode." Man's restless dissatisfaction arises from his mistaken assumption that the more he has the more he is. On the contrary, says Fromm: the more he has the less he is.

The dream of an unchangeable progress has failed. Humanism is no longer optimistic about the future. Technology has diverted us from the truth of being. Master Eckhart, Sigmund Freud and Marx all support the idea that to be is man's true destiny, the uniquely human possibility. It is thwarted and blocked by his insatiable desire to use. This is not disobedience, but the confusion of wants. We have what we should not have, and the opposite, a denial of being in relation; the cure for disobedience is forgiveness; separateness requires healing. Thus having or being determines the doctrine of atonement.

If you think Christianity has always said that covetousness is one of man's greatest sins and greed destroys human relationships, you are right. But be careful not to conclude that at last Fromm has come round to the Christian position. He is more sympathetic to religion than many humanists, but he appears to have no hope that religion can affect the change of heart needed if mankind is to escape from the having mode to the being mode. And one must logically conclude that since humanity's sin finally makes the right ones and propagates a theory of being which must put us on the right road, there is not 'much indication that Western technology is seriously questioned by Christian, humanist, Marxist, getting and spending. We are still conditioned by GNP, human fulfillment (as seen, teachers, music listeners and all the paraphernalia of mass production), and freedom (that is, to do what we please)."

Of course Fromm was not hallucinated. His naive solution to the problem of changing human hearts is a Marx-like revolution. But as he admits, communism is just as much ill as the "having mode." What good is it, after all, to be well-off if your heart is ill? The sinfulness of unthriftiness of humanism is that it has no belief in extra-human resources to free us from our obsession with possessions. But does not faith in God enable us to get out of this trap? I doubt if the importance of things!

Fromm leaves unsolved the bigger problem of the relation between having and being. Grasped that we are not simply what we have, that if we have nothing we are not nothing, are not possessions "a necessary expression" of personal being? We have to learn to possess without being possessed. The inadequacy of Fromm's solution must not blind us to the urgent reality of his analysis.